There’s a first time for everything
Use a when you are talking about something for the first time. Use the to refer to something you’ve already introduced.

There was a dog in the street. The dog was ugly and mean.
I met a nice man yesterday. The man told me a story about his town.

That’s the thing
Use the when you are talking about a specific thing:
She picked up a pen on the desk. (some pen)
She picked up the pen he left on the desk. (a particular pen)

You know what the thing is
Use the when you are talking about something that cannot be confused with something else:
He looked out at the sea.
the light the floor the ceiling the door the carpet
the sky the sea the ground the country the environment

One of a kind
Use the when there is only one, or when the subject is known, but use a/an to talk about a kind of thing:
The Queen of England is a monarch.
The teacher is a very beautiful woman.

The one I mean
Use the when talking about a specific person:
I have to ask the teacher a question.
My mother is a teacher.
I think I need to go to the doctor. (My usual doctor)
You should talk to a doctor about that problem (any doctor)
Write *a, an, or the* on the line:

1. He left his bag on the back of his chair. She picked up ____ bag and ran after him.
2. I found ____ stray cat in the alley. ____ cat was crying, so I gave it some milk.
3. I met ____ woman at the fair. ____ woman was very friendly.
4. I want to ask ____ doctor about my last X-ray.
5. Please turn off ____ light when you leave the room.
6. She has been ____ doctor for five years.
7. She is ____ very cruel person.
8. She said she wanted to buy ____ dog. She wanted ____ dog to be fierce.
9. ____ carpet was green and brown and very ugly.
10. We painted ____ ceiling black to make it look like ____ night sky.
11. We should all take better care of ____ environment.
12. When ____ president enters the room, you should stand up.
13. Yesterday we went to ____ store. ____ store didn’t have what we needed.
14. You shouldn’t eat food that has been on ____ ground.
A / An and The
Buildings & Places

Use a to talk about buildings:
  There’s a restaurant near my house.
  I need to find a bank.
  Is there a post office near here?

Use the to talk about a specific building:
  The bank is on the corner.
  I like the theater where we saw Cats.
  She went to the post office to mail some letters.

Use a to talk about places:
  Is there a lake nearby?
  I would like to see the world from the top of a mountain.

Use the to talk about unnamed, specific places:
  We spent that summer at the lake.
  The town is at the foot of the mountain.

Use neither a nor the when talking about a named place:
  We took a boat ride around Lake Erie.
  A thousand people climbed Mount Fuji that day.

For prison, schools, and church (and in British English, hospital):
If you are going to the building for the reason it was built, do not use the. If you are going to the building for another reason, use the.
  He was in prison for six years. (the reason it was built)
  I went to the prison to visit my uncle. (the building)
  She went to school late. (the reason it was built)
  He is at the school talking to his son, who works there. (the building)
  I attended university for four years. (the reason it was built)
  Her house is three minutes’ walk from the university. (the building)
  They go to church every week. (the reason it was built)
  He cleans the church on Saturdays. (the building)

In the same way, bed, work, and home do not use the:
  It’s time to go to bed.
  She gets to work at 8:00 every morning.
  I came home at 7 p.m. yesterday. I was at home all night.
Write *a*, *an*, or *the*, or nothing on the line:

1. Call me tonight. I’ll be at ____ home.
2. Can I buy stamps here, or must I go to ____ main post office?
3. He had to go to ____ prison to visit his client.
4. He lives near ____ ocean.
5. He was at ____ church, repairing the windows.
6. I had to go to ____ school for a meeting.
7. I have to go back to ____ restaurant where we ate dinner last night.
8. I want to go to ____ restaurant for dinner tonight.
9. I’m taking a class at ____ university, even though I’m still in high school.
10. If I get accepted at ____ university, I will study languages.
11. She was in ____ prison for robbery.
12. The shopkeeper at ____ fabric store was very rude.
13. We swam in ____ lake every day.
14. We were at ____ church that morning for the services.
15. You are always early to ____ school but late to class.
16. You can cash that check at ____ bank in town. There are at least four banks on the main street.
17. You should hurry or you’ll be late to ____ work.
A / An and The
With Some Exceptions...

In English, there are exceptions to every rule. However, these are general rules for a/an and the:

Use a/an to mean per:
Three times an hour. Once a day. Twice a week. Five dollars a pound. $20 a person.

Do not use an article for meals:
I ate cereal for breakfast. He has lunch at work. They went out for dinner.

Use a or the before an adjective:

Use the (never a) before an adjective that describes a specific group:
The elderly. The young. The homeless. The unemployed. The English. The Swiss.

Use a if you are talking about an actual object:
I need a new television.
She bought a computer from the secondhand store.
We don’t have a radio.

Use the (or sometimes nothing) if you are talking about the idea of the object:
It’s the best toy since the television.
I don’t watch television. (no article)
The computer changed the way we communicate.
I listen to the radio every day.

If there is a name, there isn’t an article:
He is the president.
This is President Smith.
I went to the doctor yesterday.
I went to Dr. Johnson’s yesterday.
I have an uncle who lives in Florida.
My Uncle John lives in Florida.
A / An and The
With Some Exceptions..., Review

Write a, an, or the, or nothing on the line:

1. Bill Gates did not invent _____ computer.
2. Do you have _____ television at home?
3. Don’t you have _____ uncle who is _____ lawyer?
4. He calls her at least twice _____ day.
5. He thinks that _____ Dr. Novak is very smart.
6. He was _____ worst actor I've ever seen.
7. How often do you watch _____ television?
8. I don’t trust _____ doctor to tell the truth.
9. I had _____ terrible day.
10. I hope we can have steak for _____ dinner.
11. I never listen to _____ radio, only to CDs.
12. I’ve never met _____ American president.
13. It was _____ interesting film.
14. She makes twenty–five dollars _____ hour at that job.
15. _____ English are quite proud of their football team.
16. Politicians don’t pay much attention to _____ young.
17. The tickets are only two dollars _____ person.
18. What did you have for _____ lunch today?
ANSWERS

General Rules, Review
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